

As an author he had had, in his own time, few friends who approved of his works. The excuse for his memoirs, he tells us, would be that they might be read one day "by some soul like those I admired, such as Mme. Roland, or the mathematician, Gros." The last named was his inspirational teacher in his boyhood in Grenoble. The thought of the unborn generations who would read him was almost a fixation. "I regard my works as *lottery tickets*," he remarks more than once, "and count only on being *reprinted in 1900*."

To the readers of 1900, and after, he would tell some fine truths about his times, as about himself. What a great thing it might be, he exclaims, to have an account of the period written by "a man who was no dupe." He would be unsparing of his contemporaries, as he would be

attempt at the "transvaluation" of moral values; while Tolstoy and Henry James (in the 1870's) esteemed him, although with moral reservations. Up to the 1880's at least, Stendhal seemed to appeal only to a choice few of the most masterly practitioners of his craft.

MEMOIRS OF EGOTISM

STENDHAL



Memoirs of Egotism
(SOUVENIRS D'ÉGOTISME)



Edited with an Introduction and Notes
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Introduction

STENDHAL AS AUTOBIOGRAPHER

ALL OF STENDHAL'S LIFE WOULD SEEM TO have been a preparation for the writing of his autobiography. Surely no man brought to such a task more aptitude, more interest, or more passion. His novels themselves, it has often been remarked (like many other great novels) were but concealed autobiographies, or, at any rate, variations upon the theme of his own life. No Jean Jacques Rousseau, indeed no Marcel Proust ever ransacked his memories more vigorously in search of times past, or interrogated his ego more earnestly, more constantly than he.

Once at a salon in Paris a man, made curious by reports of M. Henri Beyle's somewhat mystifying private character, asked him directly what his business was. The self-styled "Baron de Stendhal" fixed his sharp eye upon his interlocutor and said: "Sir, I am an observer of the human

heart." The man, thinking he was a spy of some sort, was frightened and retreated abruptly. But the observation, the analysis of the human heart and its passions had truly been his business in life. And where could one better study this subject than in oneself? Since his boyhood Stendhal had reveled in introspection; he had the faculty of surrendering himself to some emotional experience, then recording it afterward with complete self-consciousness. A great forerunner of modern psychology, he tried to examine himself, and others, with the experimental and dispassionate attitude typified by the new scientists of the time, much as his friend Cuvier, the biologist, dissected animals in his laboratory. Such a method, eschewing all bombast, or sentiment, or self-apology, he believed, had not yet been tried in the medium of literature; certainly not by Rousseau, whose *Confessions* were written in self-defense, nor by Chateaubriand, who had sought to glorify his own character.

Stendhal had a profound sense of history: did he not declare that he had once (toward 1821) postponed committing suicide out of "political curiosity" about what was going to happen next?

Born in Grenoble in 1783, in the time of Louis XVI, he was a child of the eighteenth century and also a product of the great French Revolution whose doctrines he ardently embraced. During the span of history that was his lifetime by fifty, surely approaching the most turbulent eras of ancient Rome, he had seen a half dozen dynasties come and go. He had been an officer of Napoleon's army, present at his court and at many of the climactic scenes of the First Empire, including the retreat from Moscow. He had lived through "an ocean of sensations." Indeed he had lived many lives, in different lands, under many different guises: as a soldier, an administrator, a diplomat, a traveler, a gallant, a man of society, and an author. But wherever or whatever he had been, he had never accepted the appearances of things without examination; his had been a detached spirit, ever skeptical, even rebellious at ideas that were *à la mode*.

He had no religion, no home, no wife. All other obligations had been rejected by him in favor of the perpetual research for personal freedom and self-knowledge. And for those morally conservative times that came after Waterloo, dur-

ing the Bourbon Restoration in France, this was tantamount to being "a monster of immorality." M. Beyle's books, it was pointed out, were full of scandalous matter and published under a *nom de plume*. This godless philosopher lived with actresses, and perhaps even took money from them, it was whispered. "The fat Mephistopheles," he was sometimes called.

What few knew was that he was a man of infinite sensibility, for he was noticeably reserved, or in society wore various masks, including that of a wit. His wit concealed a heart that had suffered sorely, a nature that had known great ecstasy and prayer—after its own fashion—not only for women, but for painting, music and literature. In the privacy of his memoirs he would have much to tell us about the real Henri Beyle who had concealed himself from the world.

Like a youth, or rather like a man who continued in the illusion of eternal youth, he was obsessed by the notion that he was misunderstood by his age. (He insisted also that his times were out of touch with realities.) Others, after the restoration of the legitimate monarchy, might turn Royalist in politics, orthodox in religion, or they

might "sell out" by merely pretending to be both. He would continue an unbeliever, a liberal, a Jacobin, devoted to the idea of democracy that was now out of favor in Europe. When the Romantic movement in literature (which he had helped to launch) began to embody excesses of style and an intellectual fuzziness that he could not abide, he stood forth as an anti-Romantic, addicted to dryness and factual precision. This was enough to earn him anew the opprobrium of critics who were in fashion. In any case they had long had the habit of slating his books, especially *The Red and the Black*, for alleged bad taste and subversive ideas. His books were little read by the public, and he was being forgotten in his own time—as he was to be forgotten for fifty years after his death. But what of the future?

The future generations, Stendhal guessed shrewdly, would be different. The reader of tomorrow would be republican and equalitarian in his outlook, more concerned with scientific truth than with religious authority. Hence he decided to do what few writers have ever done: to address himself to posterity. Though he was ignored in

the 1830's, he predicted: "I shall be read in 1900."

He said to himself cheerily:

I can see clearly that many writers who enjoy a great reputation today [1832] are detestable. What would be a blasphemy to say of M. de Chateaubriand now, however, will be a truism in 1880.

This was an apt prophecy, as were so many of his others. The glamorous author of *René* and *Le Génie du Christianisme* was read mainly by schoolboys in the heyday of Zola. Stendhal, on the other hand, was "revived," or rather resuscitated, like Shakespeare, Blake and Herman Melville. He would appear astonishingly "modern" not only in 1890, but in 1950, so that the veriest scraps of his notebooks and letters would be held precious by his devotees of later times.¹

¹ *Stendhal did not know that he was being read with great enjoyment during his own lifetime by the aged Goethe. Truly he was the "writer's writer." Balzac was unable to win readers for the Chartreuse de Parme by his exuberant praises. Nietzsche was, in part, inspired by him in his*